

Remarks by Thomas E. Perez on Assuming the Presidency of the Montgomery County Council

December 7, 2004 Rockville, Maryland

First of all, I want to thank my colleagues from the bottom of my heart for the honor you have given me and the trust you've shown. I feel humbled to be in this position, and look forward to working with you in a spirit of collaboration, inclusion and shared respect. I have learned a great deal from each and every one of you since taking office, and I will continue to rely on your collective experience in the upcoming year.

I want to again thank Steve Silverman for his distinguished service as Council President, and congratulate George Leventhal on his election as Council Vice President. I look forward to working even more closely with you George in the next year. And I look forward to working with County Executive Doug Duncan on a wide range of challenges.

The holiday season is upon us, and holidays are a time to count our blessings. We are, indeed, privileged to live in Montgomery County. We have one of the strongest and most diverse local economies in the nation. Our famed I-270 corridor continues to stretch the bands of human understanding. We have a world class public school system. Montgomery College continues to open up endless possibilities for tomorrow's leaders. Downtown Bethesda continues to be one of this region's most vibrant centers for dining and entertainment. Silver Spring has sprung and Wheaton is not far behind.

We welcome our new arrivals with open arms, and believe that our racial and ethnic diversity is one of our greatest strengths. We believe that a rising tide ought to lift all boats. We believe in giving a hand to those who have fallen on tough times or are disabled or have special needs.

As exceptional as Montgomery County's accomplishments are, so too are the challenges ahead. While I can hardly conceive of a more opportune time for the affluent to compound their wealth, neither can I think of a time when the poor and vulnerable have been at greater risk.

There's never been a more challenging time for local government. We see federal and state governments short-changing critical needs in health & human services, education, transportation, housing – you name it. Federal budget surpluses – remember those – have been swept away on oceans of red ink by an administration that puts our future on a credit card that your kids and mine will someday have to pay off. And the price for giveaways to the “haves” is cuts in programs for those who need a little – or a lot – of help.

Maybe if all the Republicans were more like Howard Denis and less like Tom DeLay life would be a little easier.

As we confront these challenges, I am inspired by the words of Nkosi Johnson. Nkosi was from South Africa, and he died of AIDS at the tender age of 12. He captured the

hearts and minds of the world when he spoke to the World AIDS conference in South Africa a few years ago, and challenged the world to tackle the AIDS pandemic.

He left us with a piece of wisdom I'd like to share with you.

"Do all you can with what you have in the time you have in the place you are."

This would be a good mantra for the Council over the next year.

Now, maybe, some local governments may wash their hands of it all and say, "hey, we'd like to help but we just can't."

That's not Montgomery County. We can't do it all, but as Nkosi Johnson says, we must do all we can with what we have.

The Scripture says that "by your deeds, they shall know ye." Here are some of the things I want to do over the next 12 months.

I want to make 2005 the year of the Consumer in Montgomery County. Here's how:

- I want to expand the role of Montgomery County's Department of Consumer Affairs in protecting County consumers by reestablishing it as a separate County department, and by giving it the resources necessary to do its job.
- I want to continue our efforts to lower the cost of prescription drugs for our employees and our residents. The federal government should be leading this effort, but the Bush administration and the Republican leadership in Congress have put special interests ahead of the public interest. Our drug importation program for employees will be in place early next year and I will search for ways to make safe, low cost prescription drugs available to all residents. Thanks to Councilmember Praisner, discount drug cards will be available soon. Under Chairman Leventhal's leadership, we will continue to expand access to health care for the uninsured. I intend to ensure that our county continues to be an incubator of innovation on the most important consumer issue in America.
- We need to crack down on predatory lending, and Councilmembers Subin, Floreen and I have introduced a bill to do just that. Owning a home in Montgomery County is hard enough in the best of circumstances. Predatory lending practices add insult to injury. The fight against predatory lenders who use the corrosive authority of usurious fine print to destroy a person's financial future isn't an African American cause, or a Latino cause, or a senior cause. It is our cause.
- Our senior population is growing rapidly. As a former prosecutor, I have seen first hand how seniors can be ripe targets for rip off artists. We need to develop a plan to protect our seniors from flim flam men and other con artists.

- Consumer issues pervade so many aspects of life in our county. Just look at the last year. We reminded Pepco that they are a public trust and must put customers first. We reformed our taxicab code to improve customer service, and my office and others received numerous requests from constituents with landlord tenant concerns. I cannot think of a cause more unifying, nor can I think of an effort that has the potential to relieve the burden of so many, regardless of social position or background.

The next “new” thing is I want to do is to do better at the “old” things.

You know, it’s great to build new things – whether it’s a performing arts hall or a highway, a conference center or a jail. I am excited about all of these facilities. As we speak, thousands of second graders are at a concert at Strathmore Hall. It’s fun to cut ribbons and witness progress, except that while we are adding new facilities, many of our old facilities are falling apart.

We added additional resources for tree trimming in our most recent budget. Yet, we are supposed to be trimming each tree every 12 years. Our current rate is every 36 years. Our backlog is tens of thousands of trees.

Under Nancy Floreen’s leadership, we added substantial money for road repaving in the most recent budget. At this rate, however, we won’t catch-up with our backlog for a number of years. Our maintenance schedule for road repaving is a full employment act for businesses that repair busted tires from County potholes but it’s no way to run a railroad.

There are 1000 work orders for maintenance of our parks sitting on Chairman Berlage’s desk.

Elementary school principals often have to beg for money from the surrounding community to replace playground equipment damaged by storms because they admit it would be decades – decades – before the school system would replace it?

And don’t even get me started over our ill-advised decision to suddenly pull trash cans out of most County parks.

If you think something’s wrong with this picture, you’re right. We must pay far more attention to the care and maintenance of County facilities. I will convene a Council task force, headed by Councilmember Marilyn Praisner, that will inventory our County infrastructure needs, prioritize them, and suggest a budget timetable for playing catch up. And I will push to fund these needs in our budget, even if it means that a few new projects have to wait.

I will continue my efforts to repeal the “Carry In, Carry Out” trash policy that pulled trash cans out of our Parks. I voted for it originally. I was wrong. Let’s change it.

We need to do more to help small business in the County. Redevelopment in Wheaton, Silver Spring, and Bethesda helps many, but the rising tide of redevelopment threatens to engulf some small business owners. Last year, we appropriated \$100,000 to help businesses adversely affected by County redevelopment projects. That money was snapped up quicker than an ice-cream cone by my two-year-old. We need to do more. I

look forward to the passage of the bill that Councilmembers Leventhal, Silverman, Floreen and I introduced to level the procurement playing field for small businesses in Montgomery County.

In addition, I am expanding an ongoing dialogue that I initiated with the Board of Trade about strategies to address the skyrocketing cost of health insurance for businesses. We need to provide help like Tony Navarro of Montgomery County. Tony owns an auto repair shop in Gaithersburg, and employs five people. He provides health insurance for his employees because he believes it is the moral and ethical thing to do. But his insurance bill went up 32% last year. This is not sustainable. We are going to shine a spotlight on this issue in Montgomery County.

We have to help save our Metrorail system, the crown jewel of our transportation infrastructure, by assisting in the search for a dedicated funding source. And we have to keep hope alive for the Bicounty Transitway and the Corridor Cities Transitway, and fight for our fair share of transportation dollars in Annapolis.

Finally, when we talk of the future, we've got to begin with our kids. With all due respect to Governor Ehrlich and his top legislative priority, the State is gambling with our children's future by not investing in K-12 education, and by not investing in higher education. It is unconscionable that our school construction budget exceeded the governor's school construction budget for the entire state.

This Governor also needs to put his money where his mouth is on the adult education front. He and former Governor Schaefer put their feet in their mouths while bemoaning the ability of some Marylanders to speak English. Maybe they didn't get the memo about how we have thousands of people on waiting lists for English classes in Montgomery County. Governor Ehrlich needs to step to the plate and provide the necessary funds to eliminate waiting lists for English classes across the state. We can have the signing ceremony for this bill at a MacDonalds in Annapolis. The Big Macs are on me.

I have spoken a number of times with Councilmember Subin about the need to add more school based health clinics. By this time next year, I want to double the number of school-based health clinics, from three to six. If a kid isn't feeling well – or isn't getting the healthcare he needs – he's not going to reach his God-given potential.

As we give shape to our 2005 agenda, I want to search for new and more effective ways to engage the public we aspire to serve. Our success in 2005 should be judged not simply by what we accomplish but also how we accomplish it. From my first day on the job, I have been struck by the fact that as we debate critical public policy issues, so often the people most affected by these decisions are not at the table. The voices of too many people are not being heard.

We can't expect all the stakeholders to come to us. We need to make house calls. And we need to work more closely with organizations such as Impact Silver Spring and Identity so that we can ensure that every voice is heard.

I intend to supplement our "regular "Town Hall " meetings held around the County with "Walking Town Halls" – where I and other Councilmembers walk and talk with people in

their neighborhoods rather than waiting for them to come to Rockville in the midst of their already busy work lives and family obligations. Our first walking town hall meeting will be in the up-county, and I am looking forward to working with Councilmember Knapp on this issue.

We need to do a better job of listening to the voices of people who are directly affected by today's challenges. For instance, we are faced with a teenage driving crisis in Montgomery County. Many of us in this room now dread watching the 11 o'clock newscasts, wondering if the top story will be the tragic death of another of our sons or daughters.

To be brutally frank, I don't know what lawmakers should do to respond to this mounting list of tragedies. But I do intend to convene a countywide summit of high school students, law enforcement officers and educators to develop a course of action that makes sense--one that shelves the political rhetoric and speaks to our children who are now at risk.

We have an ambitious agenda, and I look forward to taking on these challenges and more in a tone of civility and inclusiveness. We may disagree, my friends, but we don't have to be disagreeable about it. We have many serious issues to tackle, but we should try not to take ourselves too seriously. We should recognize that a sense of fairness is crucial, but a sense of humor often doesn't hurt either.

I'm excited. I hope you are excited too. Let's get at it. # # #